



Gaultier, Jean-Paul (b. 1952)

by Shaun Cole

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Jean-Paul Gaultier's clothes have both influenced fashions in the clubs and on the streets and have also appropriated ideas from those sources. Since his early shows Gaultier has drawn upon street styles and club culture for his haute couture creations.

A frequenter of gay clubs in London, he typically incorporates elements of gay style into his collections. His 1996 *Pin Up Boys* collection, for example, drew upon the sailor as a gay icon and presented figure-hugging pink and blue Tom of Finland style outfits.

Born on April 24, 1952 in Arcueil, France, Gaultier was an only child who spent his youth struggling to escape the influence of his parents, who were both accountants and who hoped that their son would become a Spanish teacher. The future designer was greatly influenced by his grandmother, Marie Garrabe, a hypnotist and practitioner of alternative healing who encouraged him to pursue the unmanly pastimes of sketching and costume making.

Gaultier first realized the impact of his sketches when he was punished by his school teacher for drawing Folies Bergère showgirls. He was made to walk around school with the drawing pinned to his back. The punishment, however, only made the young Gaultier aware of his potential for showmanship.

Gaultier had no formal fashion training. Instead, he sent hundreds of his sketches to various couture houses. Pierre Cardin was impressed by the work and hired Gaultier as a design assistant in 1970, on the young man's eighteenth birthday. Gaultier worked for a number of other French design houses before launching his first collection under his own name in 1976.

However, it was not until 1981, when Gaultier began reflecting and adapting with his own inimitable touch key strands of London's youth subcultures, that his talent was established and his reputation as the *enfant terrible* of the fashion world was consolidated.

In the 1980s Gaultier transformed sportswear and produced witty and imaginative but highly wearable reworks of classic designs. His fusion of classic fashion with unconventional elements made his clothes popular with gay clubbers, fashion students, and working women.

In addition to producing groundbreaking and outrageous clothes for his highly theatrical fashion shows, presented by unconventional models (transvestites, old and fat women, tattooed and pierced youngsters), he also launched cheaper diffusion ranges--Junior Gaultier (in 1988), Gaultier Jeans (in 1993), and JPG (in 1994).

In his designs, Gaultier toys with notions of masculinity and the appropriate forms of dress for men to wear. In 1985 he created his first skirt for men. While it did not create a major impact, it had some effect, as fashionable young gay men were seen in the clubs of London and Paris wearing skirts.



Jean-Paul Gaultier.
This photograph by Flickr contributor Captain Catan appears under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported license.

For his Autumn/Winter 1988 collection Gaultier again attempted to dismantle clichés of masculine styling by once more creating a skirt for men; and in 1993, responding to the popularity of kilts amongst gay men on the streets of London and New York, his *Vikings* collection included his reinvention of the skirt for men in the form of the kilt.

At this time Gaultier personally popularized the kilt as a fashion item by wearing one while co-presenting *Eurotrash*, a kitsch television program for UK's Channel 4, with French presenter Antoine de Caunes.

Gaultier has utilized his distinctive appearance, especially his bleached blond hair and blue and white striped matelot T-shirt, as a fashion statement in its own right. When he launched his men's fragrance in 1995, it was in a male torso bottle that was striped to imitate his signature T-shirt.

At the end of the 1980s, Gaultier suffered several reverses, including most painfully the loss, from an AIDS-related illness, of his lover and business partner of fifteen years, Francis Menuge.

But in 1990 he returned to the forefront of fashion by creating the now infamous corset and other stage costumes for Madonna's Blond Ambition tour. "I love Madonna. That was one of the best times of my career," he told the (London) *Observer* newspaper in 1997.

Gaultier's eye for costume has also attracted film directors. Gaultier has designed costumes for Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989), Pedro Almodóvar's *Kika* (1994), Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element* (1997), and Almodóvar's *La Mala educación* (2004), among others. He has also designed for ballet and has recently put Madonna into a kilt for her 2001 Drowning tour.

Gaultier's playfulness and irreverence for the conventions of the fashion world are also seen in his advertising, much of which toys with gay culture and homoeroticism, and in his packaging of his perfumes. His first fragrance was launched in 1993 in a bottle he designed himself, which was inspired by the basque costume he had designed for Madonna. That costume had in turn been inspired by memories of his grandmother, with whom he spent much time while growing up, and her corsetry.

The richness of Gaultier's imagination and his openness to a variety of apparently incompatible influences may be the secret of his success.

The designer lives in Paris, where his business is headquartered, but also spends time in Italy, where his clothes are manufactured.

Bibliography

Chenoune, Farid. *Jean-Paul Gaultier*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1996.

Gaultier, Jean-Paul. *A Nous Deux la Mode*. Paris, 1990.

McDowell, Colin. *Jean Paul Gaultier*. London: Cassell, 2000.

Rumbold, Judy. "Absolutely Flabulous." *Observer* (July 27, 1997): 16-23.

About the Author

Shaun Cole is curator of Designs at the Victoria and Albert Museum. He is author of *"Don We Now Our Gay Apparel": Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century* and has curated numerous exhibitions, including "Graphic Responses to AIDS" (1996), "Fashion on Paper" (1997), and "Dressing the Male" (1999), as well as two innovative "Days of Record" to document Tattooing (2000) and Black British Hairstyles and Nail Art (2001).